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ABSTRACT

In spring 1996, a statewide public poll was conducted to establish baseline measures of public attitudes toward school to work (STW) prior to its widespread implementation in Arizona schools. A total of 2,788 Arizonans participated in this initial STW poll representing 750 parents, 750 businesses, and 1,288 educators (557 teachers, 549 principals, and 182 superintendents). Findings indicated that, although 83 percent of administrators had heard something about STW, more than half of the teachers and 7 of 10 parents and businesses had heard nothing. The vast majority of parents, businesses, and teachers were not aware that they were included in a local partnership; over one-third of administrators were similarly unaware. Ratings indicated that more than half of all educators felt that public education was either good or excellent, whereas fewer than half of parents and businesses rated education as good or better. Most respondents indicated a need for school to change and clearly preferred a more comprehensive approach to education. All constituent groups were uniformly high in terms of their support for all five proposed changes that could result from STW. With regard to specific attitudes toward STW, most respondents agreed with positively phrased statements and disagreed with negatively phrased statements. Nearly 80 percent of each group supported or strongly supported the initiative, whereas about 1 of 10 were either opposed to it or undecided. (YLB)

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Public Perceptions of School To Work: Baseline Results

Arizona School To Work Briefing Paper #2

August 1996

by

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in consultation with Joel Wright, Wright Consulting Services

In October 1995, Arizona received a School To Work (STW) implementation grant from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education for the purpose of creating a comprehensive statewide system of school-to-work opportunities for Arizona students. In January 1996, the Governor's Division of School To Work solicited bids throughout the state from local "contractors" proposing to plan or implement regional STW systems. As a result of this competitive process, 13 "local partnerships" (Figure 1) were awarded roughly \$2.4 million to begin the process of developing Arizona's STW system.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy is coordinating a multi-faceted evaluation of the state's STW initiative on behalf of the Governor's Division of School To Work (GDSTW). One component of the evaluation involves public awareness and opinions of STW as a concept and a vehicle for education reform. In spring 1996, a statewide public poll was conducted to establish baseline measures of public attitudes toward STW prior to its widespread implementation in the schools and the execution of intensive marketing and education campaigns planned at both state and local levels.

This briefing paper highlights some of the initial findings from the state's baseline study of public opinions toward STW. A more detailed report is forthcoming.

An Overview of the Public Polling

In collaboration with the GDSTW and an independent polling firm—Wright Consulting Services—Morrison Institute designed and implemented public polls for three constituent groups: parents, businesses, and educators. All samples were stratified by county and, to the extent possible, by membership within one of the 13 STW partnerships. Businesses also were stratified by size (i.e., number of employees) and educators were stratified by role (i.e., teacher, principal, and superintendent) and by type of school

Figure 1
Arizona's 1995-96 local partnerships

- ★ Cochise Partnership
- ★ Coconino County Partnership
- ★ Eastern Arizona STW Partnership (Gila, Graham and Greenlee Counties)
- ★ East Valley STW Initiative (portions of Maricopa and Pinal Counties)
- ★ Inter Tribal Council STW Partnership (all American Indian tribes except Navajo)
- ★ Mohave Workforce Development Partnership
- ★ Northeastern Arizona Native American School Partnership (portions of Apache, Coconino and Navajo Counties on the Navajo and Hopi reservations)
- ★ Northeast Valley STW Consortium (portions of Maricopa County)
- ★ Northland STW Opportunities System (Apache and Navajo Counties except on the Navajo and Hopi reservations)
- ★ Pima and Santa Cruz Counties Partnership
- ★ Western Maricopa Consortium (portions of Maricopa County)
- ★ Yavapai County STW Project
- ★ Yuma and La Paz Consortium

(i.e., elementary, middle/junior, high school). All samples were randomly selected, except for superintendents (all of whom were contacted).

The polling survey contained over 50 items pertaining to public education and the STW initiative. Respondents were contacted by telephone in April and June, 1996. A total of 2,788 Arizonans participated in this initial STW poll representing 750 parents, 750 businesses, and 1,288 educators comprised of 557 teachers, 549 principals, and 182 superintendents. These sample sizes yield results that are statistically accurate within a 95% level of confidence (with margins of error not exceeding ± 4.3 percentage points).

A Summary of Results

Polling results are discussed in relation to five topics:

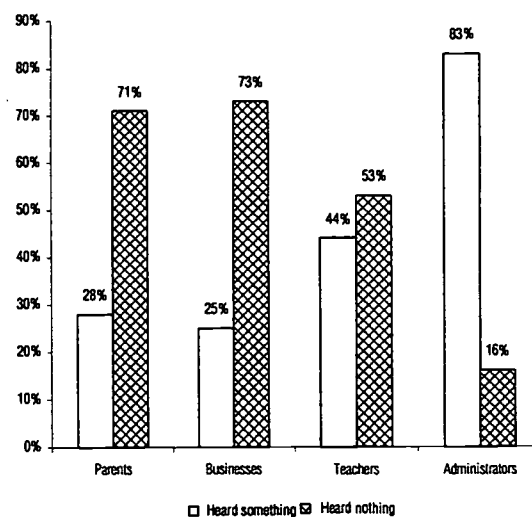
- ★ Public awareness of the STW initiative
- ★ Readiness for change
- ★ Reactions to specific changes embodied by STW
- ★ Specific attitudes toward STW
- ★ Support for the STW initiative

Results are presented for parents, businesses, teachers, and school administrators (i.e., principals and superintendents). In general, principals' and superintendents' responses are similar enough to combine, while teachers' responses warrant individual reporting. Other results are reported when pertinent.

Public Awareness of the STW Initiative

Two questions probed respondents' awareness of the STW initiative. One question simply asked whether or not respondents had ever heard of STW. Figure 2 shows that while 83% of school administrators have heard *something* (a lot or a little) about STW, more than half of the teachers (53%) and seven of every ten parents and businesses (71% and 73% respectively) have heard nothing about the initiative. Note: Figure 2 does not include "Not sure" responses.

Figure 2
Arizonans' knowledge of the STW initiative



A second question asked: "To the best of your knowledge, are the public schools in your area involved in the STW initiative or not?" This question is important because *all* schools in Arizona (with the exception of Pinal County which will be included as of FY 1996-97) are included in the state's emerging system as part of a local partnership. Table 1 shows that the vast majority of parents, businesses, and teachers are not aware that they are included in a local partnership, while over one-third of school administrators are similarly unaware.

Table 1
Arizonans' awareness of membership in a local partnership

	Aware	Unaware
Parents (n = 750)	14%	86%
Businesses (n = 750)	11%	89%
Teachers (n = 557)	20%	80%
Administrators (n = 731)	62%	38%

*Administrators include principals and superintendents.

Readiness for Change

Three questions dealt with Arizonans' perceptions of and satisfaction with public education. First, respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of public school education (Table 2). Ratings indicate that more than half of all educators feel that public education is either good or excellent, while less than half of parents and businesses rate education as good or better.

Table 2
Ratings of the quality of Arizona public education

	Excellent-Good	Fair	Poor-Very Poor
Parents	43%	39%	18%
Businesses	46%	33%	21%
Teachers	66%	28%	6%
Administrators	79%	18%	2%

*Administrators include principals and superintendents.

Respondents also were asked whether or not they felt that schools need to change how they operate. Although many consider public education to be of relatively high quality, most indicate a need for schools to change (as shown in Table 3).

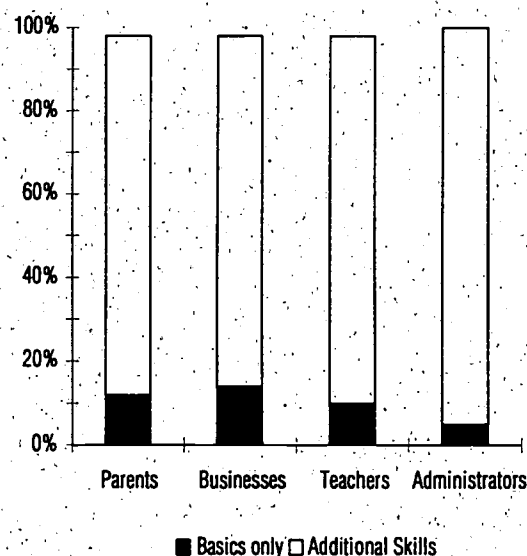
Table 3
Ratings of the need for changes in Arizona public education

	Degree of change needed		
	Major	Minor	None
Parents	54%	42%	4%
Businesses	61%	33%	6%
Teachers	43%	53%	4%
Administrators	35%	60%	5%

*Administrators include principals and superintendents.

Asked what kind of changes are needed—specifically in terms of back-to-basics or more comprehensive education including skills such as computer and work skills—respondents clearly preferred a more comprehensive approach to education (Figure 3). Of the few who *do* support a “basic skills only” approach, businesses are most in favor (14%), followed by parents (12%). Note: Figure 3 does not include “Not sure” responses.

Figure 3
Support for types of learning programs needed in Arizona's public schools



Reactions to Specific Changes Embodied by STW

Respondents were informed that the STW initiative could result in significant changes in how Arizona's public schools operate. Five changes were given and respondents were asked to indicate whether they would support or oppose the proposed change. *All* constituent groups were uniformly high in terms of their support for *all* proposed changes. In rank order, Arizonans polled support the following:

- ★ Changes in teachers' duties to emphasize instruction in teamwork, work habits and other work-related concerns (89% support; 11% opposition/uncertainty)

- ★ Programs/curriculum designed in collaboration with business and community leaders, employers, and parents for the purpose of integrating school-based, work-based and connecting activities (86% support; 14% opposition/uncertainty)
- ★ Comprehensive learning programs to prepare students for work after they leave the public school system (82% support; 18% opposition/uncertainty)
- ★ "Career majors" for students (80% support; 20% opposition/uncertainty)
- ★ The creation of employment opportunities for students (80% support; 20% opposition/uncertainty)

Specific Attitudes Toward STW

Two series of items explored respondents' attitudes toward specific statements or phrases about STW. First, six conclusions (three paired positive and negative statements) about STW were presented and respondents were asked to agree or disagree with each. A majority of respondents in each constituent group disagreed with the negatively-phrased conclusions (e.g., STW is another government boondoggle that won't really help the public schools) and agreed that STW is an initiative that will:

- result in a more educated workforce;
- help educators do their jobs more effectively because others, like employers, will be involved in educating students; and
- help Arizona communities, including rural ones, because a better-prepared workforce will encourage new business to locate here.

Second, respondents were asked to react to 14 phrases about STW, seven of which were phrased positively and seven negatively. As a rule, most respondents in each constituent group agreed with positively-phrased statements and disagreed with negatively-phrased

statements. Exceptions to these trends are as follows:

All groups tend to disagree that all students can participate equally in STW.

Teachers tend to disagree that STW provides training for *all* types of students.

Teachers are split (50-50) on what STW is: half see it as technical training only; half see its potential to prepare students with career aspirations involving higher levels of education (e.g., doctors; lawyers).

Educators (teachers, principals and superintendents) tend to disagree that STW is a good example of education reform.

Educators tend to disagree with the idea that STW will work because non-school personnel will be more engaged in the education system.

Teachers, parents, and businesses tend to agree that STW won't work because public school bureaucrats refuse to change the way they do business.

Support for the STW Initiative

Figure 4 (on the following page) shows constituent groups' support for and opposition to the STW initiative. As Figure 4 illustrates, nearly 80% of each group "supports" or "strongly supports" the initiative, while about one of every ten are either opposed to it or undecided.

One aspect of the polling involved asking the "support or oppose" question both at the beginning and end of the interview. The repetition of this item was designed to detect changes in attitude toward STW as a result of learning more about the initiative's specifics in the context of the interview.

While "pre-post support" remained the same for parents, businesses, and superintendents, it

dropped among principals and teachers from beginning to end of the interview. In fact, the change in their level of support is statistically significant (i.e., more than a 3.5 percentage point drop). While some change in support may be attributed to aspects of the interview itself (e.g., the respondent did not like the interviewer or the questions), the degree of statistical significance suggests that these two groups altered their perceptions of STW through the course of the interview. Nevertheless, a majority of both teachers and principals are in favor of the initiative.

Respondents also were asked what they would be willing to do to personally support the initiative. Seven options were listed. Table 4 indicates how each constituent group is willing to personally support the STW initiative.

Figure 4
Arizonans' support for and opposition to STW

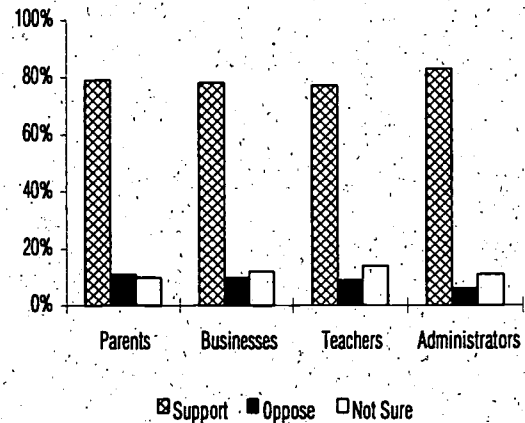


Table 4
Arizonans' willingness to personally support the STW initiative

Would definitely or probably be willing to...	ALL (n=2788)	Parents (n=750)	Businesses (n=750)	Teachers (n=557)	Administrators (n=731)
Encourage, support and help an STW student (own child or other)	92%	94%	90%	90%	94%
Mentor a STW student on working in business and industry	76%	75%	77%	67%	81%
Participate in designing STW programs	73%	74%	66%	66%	82%
Pay up to \$50 per year in additional taxes to help fund STW	69%	68%	68%	63%	74%
Vote for people running for elective office that support Arizona's STW initiative	69%	71%	68%	68%	68%
Help recruit employers for STW students	65%	65%	60%	55%	79%
Employ at least one student from a local STW program	64%	54%	71%	48%	78%

Preliminary Conclusions

In one sense, Arizona presents a *tabula rasa* for the STW initiative given that, with the exception of school administrators, most of those polled were unaware of the initiative prior to participating in this baseline study. This lack of knowledge bodes well insofar as the GDSTW and local partnerships can implement public awareness campaigns with the promise of achieving measurable differences in public opinion over time. At the same time, the results of the poll indicate that at both state and local levels, constituents need to be made aware of STW and the fact that they are considered part of the state's system of local partnerships.

It appears to be a good time to implement a STW system in Arizona. While many people feel that public education is doing a good job, most generally favor changing education to include the kinds of skills reinforced by the School To Work Opportunities Act. Specifically, changing teachers' roles and modifying curricula and programs to better integrate school and work-based learning opportunities received strong support.

There is also a high level of support for the concept of student "career majors" and for creating student employment opportunities. However, these appear to be the most controversial changes among those discussed. One of every five persons polled opposed these two measures. Interestingly, more educators opposed the career majors concept than parents and businesses, while more parents and businesses opposed student employment than educators. Since both career majors and student employment involve students directly, it may be that respondents are more reserved when it comes to changes that directly impact students. Or, since non-school personnel are more likely to favor school changes (career majors), and school personnel are more likely to favor non-school changes (employment), it may be that changes involving students are more acceptable as long as they're made on someone else's turf.

Regarding specific attitudes toward School To Work, polling results are generally favorable toward STW. Nevertheless, results suggest that educators—in particular—view STW less as an education reform initiative and *more* as another educational program. This view, coupled with a belief that STW is neither intended for all students nor capable of including all students, presents a challenge to state and local STW practitioners in terms of enacting STW as it is intended—as an education reform initiative.

An additional challenge is posed by the fact that not all of those polled are uniformly optimistic that STW will succeed. School administrators see the initiative as failing if they are required to give up too much of their decision-making authority. Conversely, parents, businesses and teachers see the initiative as failing because "public school bureaucrats" refuse to change. These opposing views suggest a "stalemate" that has to be overcome if STW is to be successful.

Good news for Arizona rests in the degree to which Arizonans appear willing to personally support the initiative. Notably, nearly 70% of those polled said they would vote for politicians who support STW and pay additional tax dollars to help fund the initiative.

This baseline study indicates a lack of awareness of, yet positive climate for, the implementation of a statewide system of STW opportunities for Arizona's youth. Future polls will assist in determining changes in these areas.



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